

had 'insulted' Africans and Europeans alike; he ordered their release and the transfer of the civil servants involved (pp. 75–6).

The great value of this study comes in particular from both the direct link with present-day problems and also the surprising concatenations that emerge from Rich's focus on food habits. The author uses the general literature (the Comaroffs, Cooper, Guyer, and many others) in imaginative ways but always returns to the vicissitudes of the food economy on the ground. Occasional excursions towards a wider perspective suggest that the Libreville struggles with severe food shortages were certainly not exceptional, when compared with other emerging cities on the continent. Yet it is also clear that the central role of the Mpongwe as a middlemen elite had special contours. It might be interesting to relate all the twists and turns of developments in Libreville to Jane Guyer's 2004 book on *Marginal Gains*. In particular, Guyer's exploration of how entrepreneurs in 'Atlantic Africa' succeeded in making their profits from the discontinuities between very different systems of value, might relate very well to Rich's data on the struggles of the Mpongwe elite. But this is matter for another article. The present book offers a fascinating story that has intriguing implications for the analysis of the vicissitudes of (post-)colonial developments at large.

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## A USEFUL SYNTHESIS OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY ANGOLAN HISTORY

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*Angola: The Weight of History*. Edited by PATRICK CHABAL and NUNO VIDAL.  
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Over the last ten years, Angola has mutated from the paradigmatic case of a sub-Saharan African civil-war country to an oil- and resource-based rentier state, and access for historians to archival and oral information has improved significantly. Thus it is appropriate, at this point, to consider a state-of-the-art analysis of Angolan society and its political mechanisms. Moreover, there is no recent synthesis of Angolan evolution in the twentieth century, and contributions in English are even less prominent. Patrick Chabal and Nuno Vidal's edited volume therefore represents a welcome approach.

The group of authors assembled here is a fairly well-established one, with Malyn Newitt elaborating the historical side along the lines of his once path-breaking *Portugal in Africa: The Last Hundred Years*; Tony Hodges giving an account of the recent economic development, with a highly interesting set of new data; Nuno Vidal providing two chapters on the post-colonial political system and multi-party democracy, and on the possible emergence of a civil society; and a contribution by the late Christine Messiant, which will give readers interested in recent Angolan politics another introduction to Messiant's new, posthumously published monographs written in French. It has, however, to be said that Messiant's chapter and Vidal's first overlap rather strongly, with Messiant being more pessimistic in her

prognosis. It would ultimately have been more sensible to transform Vidal's chapter into a more pointed response to Messiant's work.

In his introduction, Patrick Chabal attempts to give the book a particular programme. He rightly argues that Angola has long been regarded from a Lusophone perspective, whereas he holds it necessary to proceed to comparisons with other sub-Saharan African countries (p. 2). Chabal proposes a viewpoint focussed on the ruling *Movimento Popular da Libertação de Angola* (MPLA), making the debatable case that 'competition for the control of independent Angola was over in 1976' (p. 6); and he maintains that the Angolan ruling elite chooses its own pace of democratisation (p. 10), while he believes that 'the record forces us to question whether ... multiparty contests are inherently favourable to the democratisation of society' (p. 18).

Malyn Newitt's approach to Angola's history, while giving a very solid overview, contradicts the first and central argument of Chabal's introduction: Newitt explains the evolution of Angola's society and the emergence of Angolan elites from the 'Afro-Portuguese' and Creole contribution. This narrative gives little room for comparisons with other African cases, instead explaining MPLA success as the result of the excellent performance of this movement inside propaganda-intensive Lusophone networks that were mainly accessible for Creoles, while rightly characterising the group (like its competitor movements) as 'ineffective on the ground' during much or all of the war of liberation.

Christine Messiant's contribution is a detailed if sombre report on a nomenklatura operating 'with virtual impunity' (p. 96), where the president is able to create 'his own civil society' (p. 114), and where an aggressive nationalist discourse is applied in cases of disunity inside the ruling elite (p. 120). Nuno Vidal, in contrast, is the only one of the contributors who attempts to point out the differences between Angola's trajectory and those of other African countries as demanded by Chabal: it is neo-patrimonial 'as in so many other African countries' – following in this the frank comments of members of the MPLA elite about the nature of their system (p. 156)! While Vidal describes the opposition as 'not operational', he points to the existence of 'anti-MPLA zones' in the country (p. 167); it remains somewhat obscure how this opposition manifests itself. The same is true for the non-governmental organisations that are discussed in Vidal's second article as possible means of expression for a nascent 'civil society'. However, this civil society, in its dependence on external sources of money, and in its opposition to the force of regime-created 'loyal' associations, appears to be doomed to succumb (pp. 222–6). Again, the comparison with other African cases could have brought additional insights. Tony Hodges in his analytic account of Angola's economic process after decolonisation attempts to give at least some of these comparative elements, without going into too much detail. Finally, it would have been useful if the editors had integrated a discussion of the impact of ethnic divisions in Angola. This being said, scholars and students of the history and political science of the African continent will highly appreciate the book as the new standard in the introduction and further analysis of the structures of one of sub-Saharan Africa's most dynamic and most contradictory countries.

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